



INDIRA GANDHI
Up Close and Personal

FEBRUARY 2013 • ₹ 75

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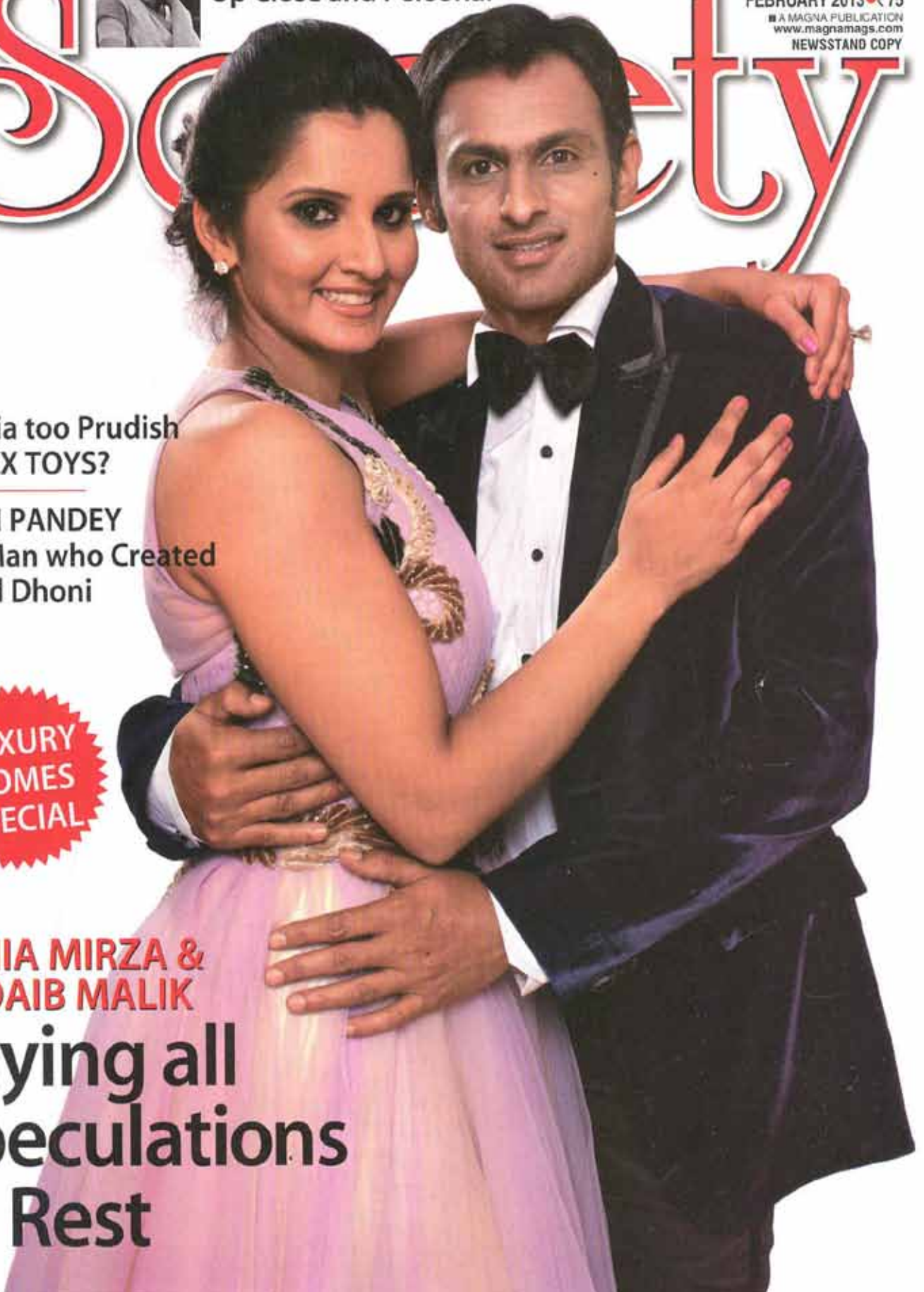
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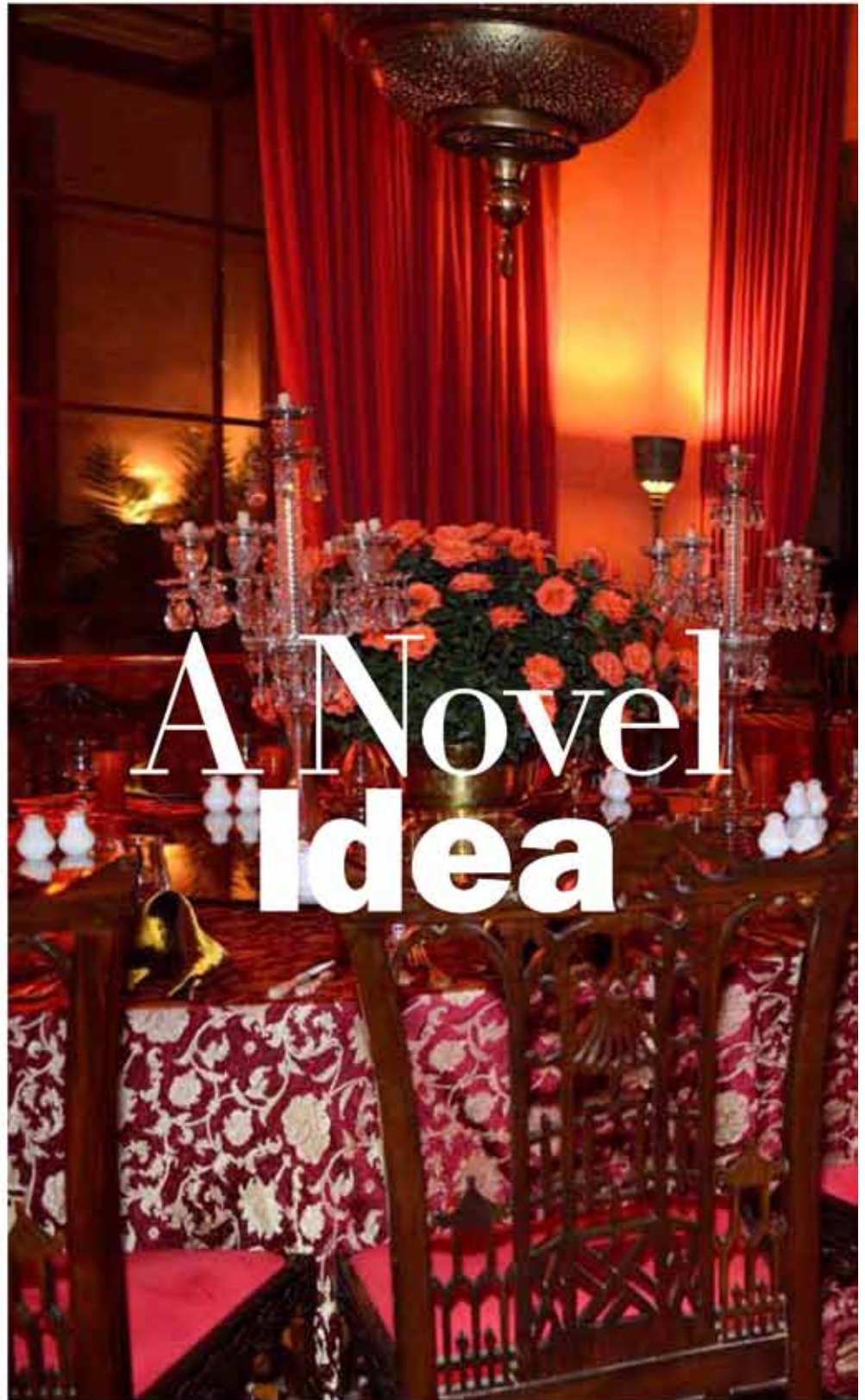


The Oxford Bookstore now has its first bookstore overseas. Director Priti Paul is very excited, and speaks to Society about it

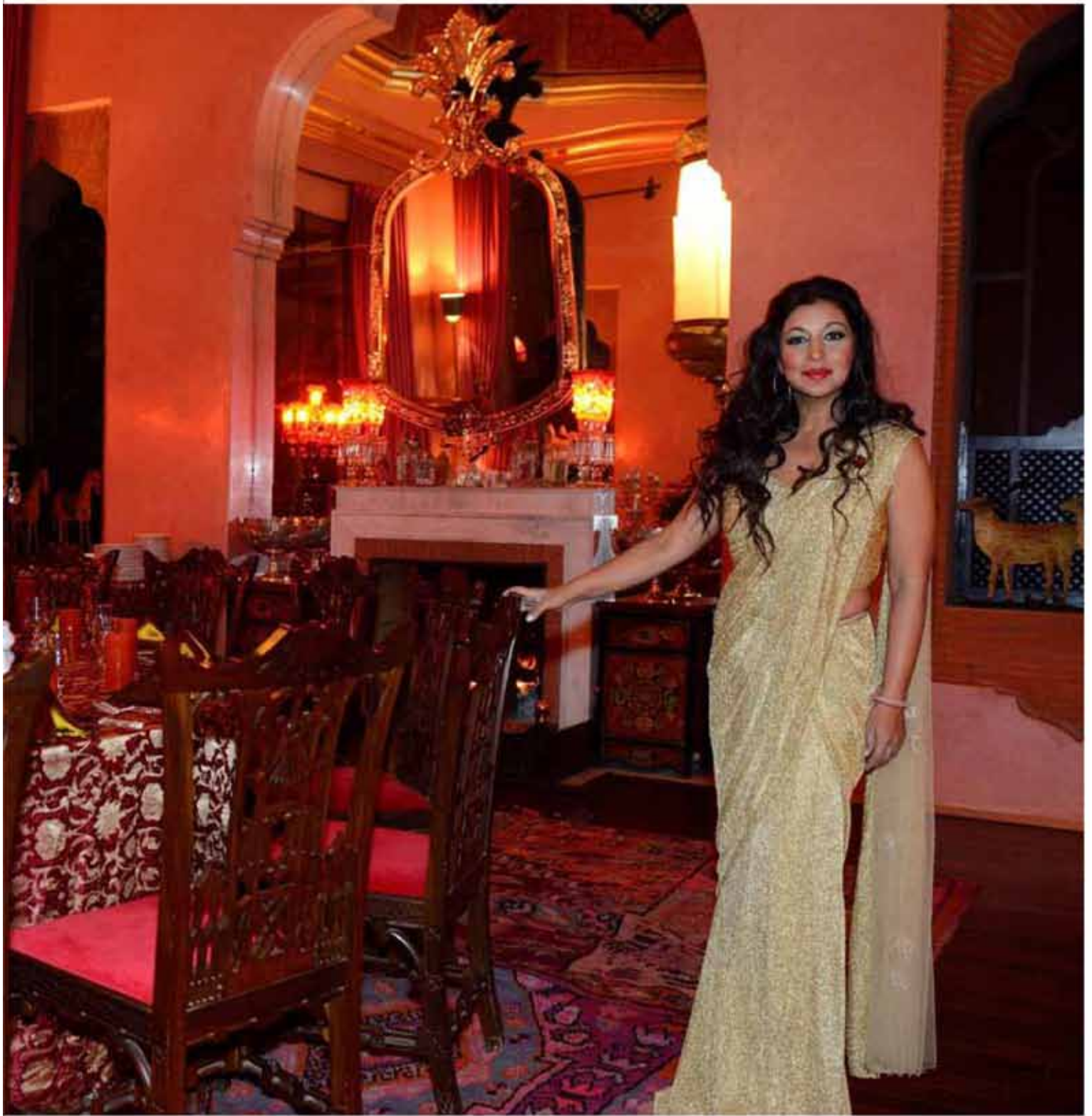
BY KAKOLI PODDAR

“Marrakech is my home now as is India. So, I am very pleased to bring this treasure house of fine book collection to the city,” Priti Paul gushes. Post her Arabian fairytale, whirlwind romance and wedding, Priti has made Marrakech her home where she lives with her Moroccan husband Jaouad Kadiri and three young sons Jad, Kais and Jai.

Priti felt that Marrakech needed a store like this. She often had to buy books for her sons all the way from London. Hubby Jaouad was very impressed by the Oxford Bookstore even during their courtship days. “He had come to Mumbai to meet me and when we went to Oxford, he said that I must launch one in Marrakech.”



A Novel Idea



The Marrakech Oxford Bookstore is called 'Katakali' and is actually located in the luxurious Taj Palace Marrakech (owned by Jaouad), at the foothills of the Atlas Mountains in the exclusive palm-filled oasis of Palmeraie. Incidentally, Jaouad's JK Hotels has recently entered into a management contract with the Taj Group.

Priti says, "The bookstore launch was a few days after the launch of the Taj Palace Marrakech, and was a part of the extended series of launch parties." The store launch was graced by Morocco's renowned fashion designer, Tami Tazi, who also launched her book, *Caftans*.

Why did she name the Marrakech bookstore 'Katakali'? "I thought on it for a long time. My husband was okay with the name 'Oxford', but I felt that the Marrakech store should have a name which justifies my Indian roots. 'Oxford' has more English connotations and 97 per cent Moroccans are French speaking. Arabic, French and Berber are the major languages spoken by the Moroccans, and those living in the northern parts of the country also speak Spanish. In fact, my

"'Katakali' is like a jewellery box, where the jewels are the books. It is a boudoir for books. I hope it wins the hearts of the Marrakechis and becomes the city's most treasured bookstore."

in-laws speak Spanish. I felt that the name Oxford would not be something that the local Moroccans would identify with," she says. So, after a lot of soul-searching, Priti decided on the name 'Katakali' because she felt it had various connotations at varied levels. For instance, it has a playful India catch to it. Incidentally, there is not a single visual of Kathakali dance form in the store. "I deliberately desisted from that as it could be distracting," she says and adds, "On another level, 'Katakali' literally means 'Art of the Tale', *Kali* means art and *Kalba* means story, so each book actually is a tale waiting to be unfolded. The name has gone down very well with the Moroccans, they find it exotic. I like it that people are so intrigued by the name that it has caught their imagination, and they are asking and talking about it."

Priti has been working on 'Katakali' for three years. "I was pregnant with my smallest one when I started planning on it, and now when it is ultimately launched, Jai is two."

The ambience and decor of 'Katakali' is very different from the contemporary chic Oxford Bookstores of India. Priti, who has studied architecture and design, has conceptualised the design of the interiors. She says, "While working on the design, I have collaborated with my husband's guru, Stuart Church, an American artist and Orientalist."

'Katakali' has a luxurious, exotic look about it. Here, the opulence of the Ottoman architecture blends with the richness of Oriental and Indian influences. Visually, it is a vibrant combination of rich red, gold and black, with embellishments of crystals and embroidery. Says Priti, "'Katakali' is like a jewellery box, where the jewels are the books. When one steps into it, one has the feel of entering a boudoir. It is a boudoir for books. I hope it wins the hearts of the Marrakechis and becomes the city's most treasured bookstore."

'Katakali' is built in a couple of thousand square feet area, and is divided into two separate rooms. One room has the Arabic and the French publications, including the bilingual





Like the Indian Oxford Bookstores, tea is an important part of the bookstore experience here. However, 'Katakali' would not have a separate tea corner or 'Cha-bar'.

books, and the other room has English books. Priti says, "There is a space in front of the store where I plan to have journals and magazines. The space around the store would be devoted to the store's events." Like the Indian Oxford Bookstores, tea is an important part of the bookstore experience here. However, 'Katakali' would not have a separate tea corner or 'Cha-bar'. Preeti says, "Tea would be served anywhere in the store. One can browse over a volume sipping any of the tea concoctions on offer. Besides the famous Moroccan mint tea, there would be a lot of other herbal teas on offer, including the Indian variations of the *masala chai* and ginger tea, which the Moroccan find very exotic."

Priti is the moving force behind the revamp and expansion of the Oxford Bookstore chain in India. Besides coming up with a separate Oxford Junior and Oxford Express outlets and cha-bars, she had introduced to the book lovers in India a concept of a bookstore which would be a comfortable hangout spot. She says, "I have always considered the local culture and preferences. When I first launched the Bengali section in the Kolkata Oxford Bookstore, many of the Bengalis I knew had expressed skepticism over the move. But, I followed my instincts and now the Bengali section there is one of the best-selling ones."

Priti is a supermom who stresses that the priority in her life now is her kids. Her work requires her to shuttle between Marrakech, London and India. Phew! Quite a balancing act! She laughs, "Oh! There is no balance. Since I had my first and second babies back to back, I have been taking on only as much as I can manage."

Priti likes being a hands-on mum. The elder one just turned eight and the second one is just a year younger and her tiniest one is only two. She takes her sons along with her when she is travelling and avoids going to places where she would not be able to take them. Even as we speak, the youngest one comes

...with husband Jaouad, mother Shireen and sons Jad, Hais and Jai



"I feel the kids should have social and environmental awareness from an early age, so the products are organic, or from recycled paper or are contributing to a cause."

running to her, she plonks him on her desk and he starts playing with her danglers.

"My children have been the motivators behind 'Katakali'. I realised the lack of a store with good children's books in Marrakech. This Valentine's Day, 'Katakali' would be having an interesting project with school kids called *I Love Books*. The parents actually came up with this interesting idea. Each parent would buy two books—one book for their child and one for the school library, by which their kids would benefit as would the other children."

Priti laughs when she suddenly remembers something about her children. "My two elder boys had a lot of suggestions for the store's kids' section. They would tell me where the Arabic, French and English books should be placed. They were immensely disappointed that we did not have their favourite Captain Underpants books for the launch!"

The kids' section in 'Katakali' meanwhile is child friendly with lower shelves and cosy cushions. The kids' area has eco-friendly stationary, organic gift items and even cute kids' accessories made by destitute women in India. Priti says, "I feel the kids should have social and environmental awareness from an early age, so the products are organic, or from recycled paper or are contributing to a cause." She adds, "My two older sons just

She (Priti) herself did not know French when she met her husband, and Jaouad spoke little English. However, the language constraints proved no barrier and the language of love prevailed.

finished reading their first complete book. They are fluent in four languages—Arabic, French, English and Chinese.”

She herself did not know French when she met her husband, and Jaouad spoke little English. However, the language constraints proved no barrier and the language of love prevailed. Now, both of them have learnt English and French respectively. Priti laughs, “I am learning French, though I never had any plans of doing so earlier. Jaouad too can now speak and even philosophise in English. While in junior school, he did study English for four years, but he managed to learn precious little as his English teacher, Mrs Black, came with a monkey to class. I wonder if his other classmates too did any better because they were more interested in the monkey than English!”

Speaking of cultures and languages, Priti says that ‘Katakali’ has brought her in touch with the French and Arabic publishers, many of whom have expressed an interest in foraying into the Indian market. “I am also collaborating with the Moroccan and other African writers, and could bring some of their books to our Indian stores.” That would definitely open up a whole new world for the Indian readers! <<

